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## **The Early Christians and Human Sacrifice**

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#### IV. THE EARLY CHRISTIANS AND HUMAN SACRIFICE

*Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta*

Among the many accusations levelled by pagans against the early Christians, those that accuse them of cannibalism or child sacrifice deserve special attention. The interest of such charges is certainly not their novelty. Thanks to the role played by the motif of human sacrifice in the age-old discussion about civilisation and barbarism, it has appeared in numerous contexts.<sup>1</sup> It served not only as a way of opposing the civilisation of the Greco-Roman world to the barbarism outside it,<sup>2</sup> but also as a means to draw a line between culture and humanity and barbarity and inhumanity within the same cultural world.<sup>3</sup> In a religious context, the motif also frequently established

<sup>1</sup> J.B. Rives, 'Human Sacrifice among Pagan and Christians', *J. Roman Stud.* 85 (1995) 65-85.

<sup>2</sup> The examples that underline this opposition are numerous. Scythians (Ephorus, *FGrH* 70 F 4a), androphagoi (Herodotus 4.106), Taurians (Herodotus 4.103; Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*; see other references in Cicero, *Rep.* 3.15; Ovid, *Trist.* 4.4.61-82, *Pont.* 3.2.45-96; Hyginus, *Fab.* 120; Lucan 1.446; Juvenal 15.116-19), people of the Pontus in general (Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* [= EN] 1148b 19-23; *Pol.* 1338b 19-22), Carthaginians (Sophocles, *Andromeda* fr. 126 Radt, on which Rives, 'Human Sacrifice', note 21; Tertullian, *Apolog.* 9. 2-3; see in general S. Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice Monuments in their Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield, 1991) and J.B. Rives, 'Tertullian on Child Sacrifice', *Museum Helveticum* 51 (1994) 54-63) and Gauls (Caesar, *Bellum Gall.* 4.16; Strabo 4.4.5; Diodorus Siculus 5.31.3-4) alike were accused of performing such rituals.

<sup>3</sup> Political enemies were the favourite targets of such accusations (see already Plato, *Rep.* 571c-574e; 619 b-c, about the tyrant; Aristotle, *EN* 1448b 24 about Phalaris, tyrant of Acragas in the sixth century; so, also, Tatian, *Or. ad Graec.* 34.1-35), such as the supporters of the Tarquinii (Plutarch, *Publ.* 4.1), Apollodorus of Cassandreia (Diodorus Siculus 22.5.1; Polyaeus 6.7.2; Plutarch, *Sera Num. Vind.* 556d; cf. Aelian, *VH* 14.41) and Catilina (Sallust, *Cat.* 22.1-2; Plutarch, *Cic.* 10.4; Florus 2.12.4; Cassius Dio 37.30.3; Tertullian, *Apol.* 9.9; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 30.5). See in general G. Marasco, 'Sacrifici umani e cospirazioni politiche', *Sileno* 7 (1981) 167-78. Secret associations were equally accused of human sacrifice. So, for example, the boukoloi (Cassius Dio 71.4.1; Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Cleitophon* 3.15.4; Lollianos, *Phoinikika*, on which A. Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes

the difference between good and bad religion (and still does),<sup>4</sup> but could also be used as a means to condemn religion altogether.<sup>5</sup>

What is interesting about the alleged accusation of child sacrifice against Christians is the fact that in spite of its great echo in Christian sources, there is not a single pagan source explicitly documenting it. If Christians were in fact accused of such crimes, how can it be that not a single document records such charges? In the other known instances concerning barbarous peoples, political enemies and religious groups, not only the charges but even simple suspicions of human sacrifice found an enormous echo.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the many vices attributed to Jews by their enemies, of which Josephus attempts to exonerate them, several are also attested by other sources.<sup>7</sup> When approaching the alleged charges of child sacrifice against early Christians, however, we surprisingly have to rely exclusively on Christian sources.

On the other hand, it is also striking that orthodox Christians did not hesitate to use the same charges, first against numerous splinter

of the Early Christians. A Reconsideration', in *Kyriakon. Festschrift J. Quasten I* (Münster, 1970) 18-35 and *Die Phoinikika des Lollianos. Fragmente eines neuen griechischen Romans* (Bonn, 1972) 28-37; Parthenios, *Amat.* 35, with the commentary of J. Lightfoot *ad loc.*

<sup>4</sup> See the treatment of Celtic Religion by Caesar (*Bellum Gall.* 6.16.1), Pomponius Mela (3.18) and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 30.13). Human sacrifice in these cases served both to distinguish good from bad religion, namely *religio* from *superstitio*, since the latter appeared to arise from an excessive and irrational attitude towards the gods. Other foreign religions, however, were also suspect. Dio (42.26.2) reports that in a shrine to Bellona in Rome, jars full of human flesh were found, see R.M. Grant, 'Charges of "Immorality" Against Various Religious Groups in Antiquity', in R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (eds), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to G. Quispel on the Occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Leiden, 1981) 161-70. As for the participants in the Bacchanalia of 186 BC, these were also suspected of obscure crimes (Livy 39.8-18) and Apion accused the Jews of sacrificing a Greek every year (Josephus, *C. Apion.* 11.52-113). Magic was also widely suspected of involving human sacrifice (Juvenal 6.550-52) and different individuals were believed to sacrifice children in order to achieve various goals (Cassius Dio 73.16: Didius Julianus; Cassius Dio 79.1 and *Historia Augusta* 8.1-2: Elagabalus). See in general F.J. Dölger, '"Sacramentum infanticidii". Die Schlachtung eines Kindes und der Genuß seines Fleisches und Blutes als vermeintlicher Einweihungsakt im ältesten Christentum', *Antike und Christentum IV* (Münster, 1934) 188-228 at 211-17 and Rives, 'Human Sacrifice', 79 note 67.

<sup>5</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1.82-101, with his denouncement of the 'crimes of religion', was not the first to focus on human sacrifice to criticise religion. According to Porphyry's *De abstinentia* (2.27.1-3), Theophrastus in *On Piety* already attacked the traditional Greek blood sacrifice on the grounds that its origin was human sacrifice.

<sup>6</sup> Above notes 2-4.

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *C. Apion.* 2.145-50. Compare Diodorus Siculus 34.1-3; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5, *Annals* 15.44; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 5.33, etc.

groups in their crusade against heresy, and later on against the Jews. If they were really being accused of performing ritual murders, and if they were conscious of the fallacy of these defamatory attacks, how could they now seriously press them against others?

The purpose of this contribution is, first, to critically review the pagan testimonies that allegedly contain accusations against Christians in order to examine whether the existence of such charges can be established only on the basis of the Christian testimonies. Secondly, it surveys the far more numerous orthodox Christian allegations of child sacrifice against different heterodox groups. Thirdly, it raises the question of whether there is a connection between the reputed pagan charges and the orthodox accusations against heterodox groups or whether they are independent developments. Within this scope attention is paid both to various hypotheses that explain the origin of these accusations and to the sources upon which these explanations rely.

# 1

Even though our pagan sources on the issue are scanty and not always explicit, the vague testimonies of the apologists and Church Fathers are customarily provided as proof that the accusation of human sacrifice, at least in the *vox populi*, might have been rather extensive. Let us first examine the alleged pagan sources documenting this indictment.

The claim that the Christians had 'unlawful meals' seems to be a typically second-century issue, although the accusation may already have been known earlier: Tacitus reports that in Nero's time Christians were hated for their 'crimes'.<sup>8</sup> It was the German scholar Hans Achelis who first interpreted this allusion as referring to the charge of cannibalism and thus concluded that the accusation already existed in the first century.<sup>9</sup> Although following Achelis' interpretation of *flagitia*, Jean Pierre Waltzing suggested that Tacitus was actually referring to the rumours of his time.<sup>10</sup> This view has recently

<sup>8</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.40.

<sup>9</sup> H. Achelis, *Das Christentum in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* I (Leipzig, 1912) 294.

<sup>10</sup> J.P. Waltzing, 'Le crime rituel reproché aux chrétiens du II<sup>e</sup> siècle, *Académie royale de Belgique. Bulletins de la classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques* 5e série tome 11 (Brussel, 1925) 205-39 at 210. Even if Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 196 has rightly remarked that Waltzing's reservation seems to be contradicted



been restated by Albert Henrichs,<sup>11</sup> who not only thinks that Tacitus' pregnant use of *flagitia* may reflect the opinion of his contemporaries, but even suggests his dependence upon Pliny's *Letter to Trajan* in this instance (below). Despite the weight given by these scholars to Tacitus' passage, this text is, as Dölger has rightly and more cautiously pointed out, too short and ambiguous to allow such an assumption.<sup>12</sup> Besides, Tacitus' use of *exitiabilis superstitio* ('destructive superstition') to refer to Christianity and his reference to the *odium humani generis* normally attributed to the Jews<sup>13</sup> seem to suggest that he considered Christians to be a Jewish sect and consequently endowed them with the same troublesome, conflictive and violent characters.<sup>14</sup> This appears to be a preferable explanation for the 'crimes' or *flagitia* he is referring to, since it is difficult to understand why he would not mention the accusations of anthropophagy if he had had them in mind while writing this section of the *Annals*.

The second reference customarily adduced as testimony for the accusation is Pliny's *Letter to Trajan*. Whereas Tacitus' passage vaguely referred to *flagitia*, the testimony of Pliny the Younger appears to furnish some more evidence for the accusation that Christians had 'unlawful meals'. Indeed, this letter written in the second decade of the second century might even seem to imply it, for Pliny reports to the emperor that according to his inquiries the Christians 'come together to take food but of an ordinary and harmless kind'.<sup>15</sup> The view that Pliny is referring here to allegations of cannibalism is widely held. Waltzing and Dölger clearly defend such an interpretation;<sup>16</sup> Henrichs not only believes that the accusation was known to Pliny (and Tacitus), but also that it was the result of an anti-Christian campaign by Roman Jews,<sup>17</sup> Benko also apparently gives credence to this interpretation,<sup>18</sup> although he rightly points out the interesting similarities between Pliny's report and Livy's account of

by Tacitus' use of the imperfect, the latter's opinion has recently received the support of Henrichs (see next note) and Benko (see note 14).

<sup>11</sup> Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 196.

<sup>13</sup> Above note 7.

<sup>14</sup> S. Benko, 'Pagan Criticism of Christianity', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.23.2 (1980) 1055-1118 at 1064-65.

<sup>15</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.8, cf. A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966) 707.

<sup>16</sup> Waltzing, 'Le crime', 210; Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 195-96 and note 20.

<sup>17</sup> Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 24. See also below note 68.

<sup>18</sup> Benko, 'Pagan Criticism', 1074, 1089.

the suppression of the Bacchanalia in 186.<sup>19</sup> Both descriptions focus on the same elements: nightly meetings, a common meal by the participants and accusations of promiscuity and murder<sup>20</sup>. These obvious similarities seem to suggest that Pliny's report was not so much based on the alleged charges of cannibalism as on the pattern provided by Livy, which offered him a precedent for his inquiries into a secret association. As for the apparent reference to 'unlawful meals', it should be noted that Pliny's expression *cibum innoxium* can be interpreted not only as 'impure food' but also as 'innocent', that is, as 'not harmful for a third party'.<sup>21</sup> Given the parallelism with Livy and the possibility of understanding the passage otherwise, Pliny's affirmation that Christians 'come together to take food but of an ordinary and harmless kind' should perhaps rather be explained in the light of the Bacchanalia precedent, during whose feasts poisonings were not unknown.

The astrologer Vettius Valens, whose floruit was between ca. AD 140 and 170, is sometimes adduced as testimony for the existence of the same accusation as well. He may be referring to it when he says that 'some of them deny the divine and have a different worship or eat unlawful meals', although he does not explicitly mention Christians.<sup>22</sup>

However, the most important of the alleged pagan sources documenting the charge of cannibalism against Christians is the supposed testimony of Marcus Cornelius Fronto. On the basis of the *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, some scholars believe that the famous Roman orator who lived between 100 and 166 (or 176)<sup>23</sup> may have

<sup>19</sup> Livy 39.8-19. According to Livy, there were nightly meetings and secret rites, which included wine and feasting, promiscuity and, occasionally, murder.

<sup>20</sup> See Benko, 'Pagan Criticism', 1072. The similarity between both passages was also noted by Grant, 'Charges of Immorality', 161 who thinks that 'something like Livy's account seems to have been in his mind when he investigated the activities of Bithynian Christians', even though we cannot be sure that Pliny read about the Bacchanalia; see also Rives, 'Human Sacrifice', 74 note 44.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.5, *innoxius ictus*; see Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 195-96, note 20.

<sup>22</sup> Vettius Valens, *Anth.* 4.15.4; see Rives, 'Human Sacrifice', 65, note 3. For Vettius Valens' date see now Vettius Valens, *Anthologiae*, ed. D. Pingree (Leipzig, 1986) v-vi.

<sup>23</sup> The existence and the character of Fronto's alleged attack on Christians still are a matter of controversy. See J.H. van Haeringen, 'Circensis Noster (Minucius Fel. 9.6)', *Mnemosyne* 3 (1935) 29-32; P. Frasinetti, 'L'orazione di Frontone contro i cristiani', *Giornale italiano di filologia classica* 3 (1949) 238-54, who even dates it to between AD 162-166; W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution* (New York, 1967) 187-8; G.W. Clarke, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix* (New York, 1974) 221-24; Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 26ff. For the dating of Fronto's life, below note 31.

played an important role in the formation of the story about human sacrifice among Christians.<sup>24</sup> Others go even further and suggest that he may have included these charges in a specific speech *contra Christianos*,<sup>25</sup> although nothing of the kind has been preserved among Fronto's writings. As a matter of fact, the *Octavius* never says that Fronto referred to the charges of cannibalism. Q. Caecilius Natalis, one of the interlocutors in *Octavius*, neither cites Fronto as his source when he affirms that Christians 'establish a herd of a profane conspiracy, which is leagued together by nightly meetings, and solemn fasts, and inhuman meats',<sup>26</sup> nor when he describes child sacrifice as performed by Christians.<sup>27</sup> Rather, Caecilius' reference to Fronto opens his description of the banqueting and the promiscuity after it<sup>28</sup> and this, consequently, is the only detail we may consider as being referred to by the Roman orator.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that the conversation recreated by Minucius Felix is a clear literary fiction,<sup>30</sup> and that consequently we should be careful when evaluating the facts referred to in it, scholars tend to magnify the importance of the role played by Fronto.<sup>31</sup> They not only believe in the existence of the supposed speech against the Christians, but also speculate that Fronto's accusations may have had their origin in peculiar practices of various splinter groups.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 200; S. Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (London, 1985) 60-68.

<sup>25</sup> E. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 1980) 64-66.

<sup>26</sup> Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.4.

<sup>27</sup> Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.5. See *infra* note 62.

<sup>28</sup> Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.6, cf. Rives, 'Human Sacrifice', note 4.

<sup>29</sup> Despite this, after speculating on the occasion and the general character of Fronto's speech, Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 27 states the following: 'That he (*scil.* Minucius) should have limited his attack to the *convivium* and omitted the far more spectacular charge of homicide, is hard to believe, if this is really what Minucius wanted to imply'. Nevertheless, he rightly criticises the attempt to reconstruct Fronto's alleged speech on the basis of the *Octavius*.

<sup>30</sup> See already G. Boissier, *La fin du paganisme* I (Paris, 1891) 321 and J.P. Waltzing, *Octavius* (Louvain, 1902) 75; see also W. Speyer, 'Zu den Vorwürfen der Heiden gegen die Christen', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 6 (1963) 129-135 at 129 note 1.

<sup>31</sup> R.M. Grant, 'The Chronology of the Greek Apologists', *Vigiliae Christianae* 9 (1955) 25-33 at 25, 30 already speculated that the apologies by Aristides and Justin may be a response to a speech pronounced by Fronto in 143. See also R. Freudenberger, 'Der Vorwurf ritueller Verbrechen gegen die Christen im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert', *Theol. Zs.* 23 (1967) 97-107 at 103-05; differently, Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 26-28, thinks that the occasion of the speech may have been either the trial of Justin and his companions (between 165 and 167) or the persecution of Lyons (177). For a later date for his death see *ibid.* p. 27 note 46.

<sup>32</sup> Speyer, 'Zu den Vorwürfen', *passim*; Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 25, 26 note 40, 29, and, notably, Benko, 'Pagan Criticism', 1081-89, who produces a battery of

This is all the information we can obtain from pagan sources concerning the alleged crimes committed by the early Christians, which, regrettably, is not very substantial. The references by Pliny and Tacitus refer vaguely to 'crimes', Vettius Valens does not mention what or who he is referring to, and Fronto, if at all, was probably referring to the presumed incestuous banquets of Christian reunions. But what about Christian sources? Do they provide us with a clearer picture of the nature of these charges? Let us now take a look at the Christian testimonies.

It is in the works of the apologists of the second half of the second century that the accusations acquire a clear and distinct enunciation. Justin already alludes to 'impious accusations' levelled against 'all the Christians' in passing, but without specifying what these accusations actually were.<sup>33</sup> It is only after referring to various heretics that he becomes more explicit and specifies the accusations, namely 'the upsetting of the lamp, and promiscuous intercourse, and eating human flesh'.<sup>34</sup> Tatian remains as vague as Justin. He denies that cannibalism was practised among Christians.<sup>35</sup> As far as Theophilus of Antioch is concerned, in the third book of his *Ad Autolycum*, dedicated to refuting all pagan accusations against Christianity, he again includes the indictment of anthropophagy together with those of incest and promiscuity.<sup>36</sup>

However, it is Athenagoras, in a work written in 177, who first gives this threefold charge its familiar form, namely 'atheism, Thyestean meals and Oedipodal intercourse',<sup>37</sup> which also appears in *The Letter of the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* dated to the second century. This testimony as preserved by Eusebius records the persecution of the Christians in Lyons in 177/8.<sup>38</sup> As has been pointed out, *The Letter* furnishes perhaps the clearest proof that the accusation of cannibalism and child sacrifice had an eminently popular

(mostly later) references to associate the testimony of the *Octavius* with the alleged rituals by heretics; see also his 'The Libertine Gnostic Sects of the Phibionites according to Epiphanius', *Vigiliae Christianae* 21 (1967) 103-19. See the criticism on the issue by M.J. Edwards, 'Some Early Christian Immoralities', *Ancient Society* 23 (1992) 71-82 at 72 note 4.

<sup>33</sup> See Justin, *Apol.* 1.4.7; see also *Apol.* 1.10.6; 1.23.3; *Dial. c. Tryph.* 10.1.

<sup>34</sup> Justin, *Apol.* 1.26.6-7 at 7, also 2.12.1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Tatian, *Or. ad Graec.* 25.3.

<sup>36</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* 3.4.9.

<sup>37</sup> Athenagoras, *Legatio* 3.1, see also 34.3, 35.1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (= HE) 5.1.1-2, 8.



character. In this persecution, Christians appear to have been charged primarily with impiety and atheism, and the accusations of cannibalism present a clearly secondary character.<sup>39</sup> It is only after a series of tortures that some heathen household slaves accuse their masters of 'Thyestean banquets and Oedipodal intercourse'.<sup>40</sup> Despite the euphemism, the accusation was probably more precise, since the testimony of a Christian woman called Biblis clearly implies the charge of child murder and cannibalism.<sup>41</sup> Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that *The Letter* uses exactly the same expressions that we first find in Athenagoras. We cannot doubt that these expressions were coined by Athenagoras, since they perfectly fit the character of his text and his intention to turn the accusations against the pagans by his use of mythological examples. Given the *terminus a quo* of *The Letter*, we must conclude either that its anonymous author depended upon Athenagoras or, perhaps more likely, that Eusebius interpolated these expressions into the source he was working on.

We now turn to the testimonies of Tertullian and Minucius Felix. These authors deserve more detailed attention, since according to most investigators they illustrate an important turning point in the development of the charge against the Christians. Whereas thus far the accusation has vaguely been described as cannibalism or, with a more mythological allure, as 'Thyestean banquets', Tertullian and Minucius clearly refer to child sacrifice as an initiatory rite performed by Christian neophytes. The interpretation of these testimonies, however, is beset with difficulties that have not yet been surmounted. To begin with, they do not seem to present independent reports of the same incident. Due to their important similarities, it is generally assumed that both expositions are related to each other.<sup>42</sup> The question whether Minucius depends upon Tertullian or

<sup>39</sup> A.A. Nancy, 'La forme originale de l'accusation d'anthropophagie contre les chrétiens, son développement et les changements de sa représentation au II<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 47 (2001) 223-49 at 229-30; see Eusebius, *HE* 5.1.9.

<sup>40</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 5.1.14.1-9.

<sup>41</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 5.1.26: 'How could those to whom eating the blood of irrational beasts is not allowed eat children?'

<sup>42</sup> Another possibility is that both depended upon a common source. This theory, which was first defended by F. Wilhelm, 'De Minucii Felicis Octavio et Tertulliani Apologetico', *Breslauer philol. Abhandl.* 2 (1887), has received support from M. Sordi, 'L'apologia del martire romano Apollonio, come fonte dell' *Apologeticum* di Tertulliano e i rapporti fra Tertulliano e Minucio', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 18 (1964) 169-88.

vice versa is still a matter of controversy today,<sup>43</sup> although in our opinion a comparison between both testimonies clearly speaks in favour of Tertullian's priority (below).

Beyond their mutual relationship, however, the accounts also present difficulties. With regard to Tertullian, the interpretation of his testimony is no simple matter since he deals with the issue in two different works and his accounts are always intertwined with a high degree of irony and sarcasm. With Minucius we do not even know the exact dates of his life, and his *Octavius* is roughly dated between 160 and 260.<sup>44</sup> An additional problem with his exposition is that he allegedly based (partially or totally?) his account on the Roman orator Fronto (above). Finally, his report, even though very similar to that of Tertullian, nevertheless presents important divergences. In the following, we shall analyse their testimonies separately.

In defending Christians from the numerous vices attributed to them by the pagans, Tertullian includes the following passage in the *Apology*:<sup>45</sup>

Come, plunge your knife into the babe, enemy of none, accused of none, child of all; or if that is another's work, simply take your place beside a human being dying before he has really lived, await the departure of the lately given soul, receive the fresh young blood, saturate your bread with it, freely partake. Then while as you recline at table, take note of the places which your mother and your sister occupy; mark them well, so that when the dog-made

<sup>43</sup> See on the issue H. v. Geisau, 'Minucius Felix', *RE Suppl.* XI (1968) 988ff; Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 25-26; M.E. Hardwick, *Josephus as a Historical Source in Patristic Literature through Eusebius* (Georgia, 1989) 19-23 and C. Tibiletti, 'Il problema della priorità Tertulliano-Minucio Felice', in J. Granarolo (ed.), *Hommage à R. Braun II* (Paris, 1990) 23-34.

<sup>44</sup> For this *terminus a quo*, based on Minucius' reference to Fronto, see A. Harnack, *Die Chronologie der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1904) 324. The *terminus ante quem* is based on Novatian's alleged use of the *Octavius* in his *De Trinitate*, see Harnack, *ibid.* and J. Beaujeu, *Minucius Felix: Octavius* (Paris, 1964) lxxvii-lxxviii, who suggested that Cyprian and the pseudo-Cyprianic *Ad Novatianum* depend upon the *Octavius*. Moreover, in his opinion, internal evidence suggests that the *Octavius* was composed after the persecution of the Church by Gallus and Volusion (251-253).

<sup>45</sup> Tertullian also deals with the issue in *Ad nat.* 1.7.20ff, although his exposition in this work is somewhat bewildering. The version of the *Apologeticum* includes exactly the same basic elements, but in a much clearer fashion. Owing to a lesser degree of irony, Tertullian's intention in the *Apology* is easier to follow. It seems as though Tertullian, aware of the confusing character of his earlier work, intended to provide a better organised and therefore more effective enunciation.

darkness has fallen on you, you may make no mistake, for you will be guilty of a crime, unless you perpetrate a deed of incest.<sup>46</sup>

According to most commentators, this text proves that the charges against Christians may have experienced a clear transformation at the beginning of the third century.<sup>47</sup> What used to be simply anthropophagy has now become ritual child sacrifice performed by neophytes in their initiation into Christian mysteries. But does this text allow such an interpretation? Isolated from its immediate context, this interpretation is certainly possible. A closer examination, however, shows that the passage in question is but the culmination of a longer section which must, consequently, be analysed as a whole. From this perspective, Tertullian appears to simply amplify and develop in a sarcastic manner the threefold accusation that we already know from the apologists of the second century.

The passage occupies the central segment of a longer section of the *Apology* (Chapters 7-9), in which Tertullian deals with the accusation. Whereas in chapter 7 he presents the charges against Christians and approaches them from different angles, in Chapter 9 he intends to turn them against the accusers. In this context, Chapter 8 – the chapter that includes our passage – has a clear transitional function, since it allows him to focus on his main goal: providing a number of examples of human sacrifice that will present it as a token of paganism.<sup>48</sup>

The beginning of Chapter 7 of the *Apology* is clear as to Tertullian's intention to refute the known threefold charge of anthropophagy, promiscuous banqueting and incest:

Monsters of wickedness, we are accused of observing a holy rite in which we kill a little child and then eat it; in which, after the feast,

<sup>46</sup> Tertullian, *Apolog.* 8.2-3, cf. *Ad nat.* 1.7.31-32.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy, 'Forme originale', 231ff.

<sup>48</sup> As already pointed out (above note 45), Tertullian deals with the matter in two different places. A comparison between *Ad nationes* and the *Apology* is instructive in understanding the intention of Tertullian's recast. Whereas in the former work all the arguments are presented chaotically and are equally affected by a strong sarcasm, in the *Apology* they are conveniently organised into two sections and irony, when necessary, excluded. For example, the first of these sections, chapter 7, serves now as an introduction and the role of irony has been reduced to a minimum. In turn, the second section, in chapter 8, not only preserves the same degree of irony but also allows a more effective *reductio ad absurdum* in its last part, due to a better organisation of the material.

we practise incest, the dogs – our pimps, forsooth, overturning the lights and getting us the shamelessness of darkness for our impious lusts.<sup>49</sup>

After this opening, Tertullian immediately points out the fact that there has never been a true investigation; that no proof was ever furnished to substantiate the alleged crimes<sup>50</sup> and that no witnesses have ever provided testimony to support the charges.<sup>51</sup> The author then ironically describes Christianity as a mystery, comparable to known pagan mysteries, in order to rhetorically question how it is possible that those of the 'Christian mystery' are known to everyone, whereas the contents of other mystery rituals are unknown.<sup>52</sup> If the accusation nevertheless persists, the conclusion is obvious: it is simply rumour.<sup>53</sup>

Chapter 8 is completely dedicated to a parody of the threefold charge. This is facilitated by Tertullian's surreptitious presentation of Christianity as a 'mystery' in the previous Chapter. After referring to the promise of eternal life provided by the Christian mysteries,<sup>54</sup> Tertullian urges his addressee to join in their secret rites. It is in this context that the text quoted above is included. But just in case his sarcasm was not enough for his reader, Tertullian, loyal to his tiresome style, repeats it once again:

it is the custom for persons wishing initiation into sacred rites, I think, to go first of all to the master of them, that he may explain what preparations are to be made. Then, in this case, no doubt he would say, 'You must have a child still of tender age, that knows not what it is to die, and can smile under thy knife; bread, too, to collect the gushing blood; in addition to these, candlesticks, and lamps, and dogs – with tid-bits to draw them on to the extinguishing of the lights: above all things, you will require to bring your mother and your sister with you'.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 7.1, cf. *Ad nat.* 7.20. Even though an excess of sarcasm may obscure his intentions, the threefold charge can nevertheless be recognised in the enunciation.

<sup>50</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 7.2, cf. *Ad nat.* 7.21-22.

<sup>51</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 7.5-6.

<sup>52</sup> Tertullian, *Apolog.* 7.6-7, cf. *Ad nat.* 7.25-28.

<sup>53</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 7.8-14.

<sup>54</sup> On the issue Dölger, 'Sacramento infanticidii', 189-92.

<sup>55</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 8.7.



Besides, Tertullian's purpose is obvious in the opening to Chapter 9: 'To refute these charges more effectively, I will show that these crimes are perpetrated by you both in public and in secret, which is perhaps the reason that you have come to believe them about us also'. He begins precisely by referring to the alleged child sacrifices performed in Africa till Tiberius' time<sup>56</sup> and continues with some mythical examples of infanticide. Even though he briefly speaks about other known cases of cannibalism among barbarous peoples, he finally returns to his time and place and focuses mainly on the abortions practised by Romans. Had Tertullian presented the charge against Christians as simple cannibalism, many of the examples included in his counterattack would not have been effective. By transforming it into child sacrifice and by presenting it as a part of a Christian initiation ritual, he paves the way for his use of the numerous known instances (real or unreal) of ritual child sacrifice, notably the alleged sacrifices in the temple of Saturn in North Africa.

Consequently, Tertullian's detailed description of the alleged initiation ritual should not be understood literally, i.e. as an echo of an actual rumour, but rather as a parody or an intentional deformation that had to serve his argument. Given the context and character of this section of the *Apology*, his adaptation of the known threefold charge perfectly suits the tenor and the intention of his own work, which is an attack on paganism rather than a defence of Christianity against pagan charges. This reading gains some support when one notes that, as Dölger has already pointed out, Tertullian's description accurately follows the pattern of ancient initiation rituals<sup>57</sup> and his vocabulary deliberately includes the terminology current in the context of blood sacrifices.<sup>58</sup>

Incidentally, it is also interesting that Tertullian emphasises the lack of witnesses and documents in order to sustain the charges, and that no serious investigation had ever been instituted to substantiate them.<sup>59</sup> In his opinion, the accusation has always been pure rumour. This later affirmation indeed seems to support the suggestion,

<sup>56</sup> For Tertullian's deformation of facts in this particular, see Rives, 'Tertullian on Child Sacrifice' (see above, note 2).

<sup>57</sup> See Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 188 note 1, who refers to Apuleius, *Met.* 11.22; 23; see also Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 25 and *Die Phoinikika*, 35, notes 34-38.

<sup>58</sup> See Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 189 note 2 and, especially, 189-195; Henrichs, *Die Phoinikika*, 35. See also *infra* note 63.

<sup>59</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 7.2.

pointed out above, that the accusation had an eminently popular nature and that it never actually acquired an official character.

The version by Minucius Felix presents many points of contact with that of Tertullian, although it also includes some divergences.<sup>60</sup> At first sight, these differences might seem to speak in favour of either the independence of Minucius' account or, at least, of his priority. However, as we will immediately see, this false impression is due to Minucius' reworking and adaptation of his source to the plan of his own work. After referring to 'secret and nocturnal rites' performed by Christians, Caecilius includes the following statement:

Now the story about the initiation of young novices is as much to be detested as it is well known. An infant covered with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily – O horror! they lick up its blood, eagerly they divide the limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with this consciousness of wickedness they are covenanted to mutual silence.<sup>61</sup>

Minucius not only transforms the ritual pattern by adding new issues and eliminating others,<sup>62</sup> he also reinterprets the function and meaning of both the sacrifice and the partaking in the blood of the victim. In Minucius' version, child sacrifice is no longer the first step in an initiation into a mystery, but rather the means by which the participants in a conspiracy pledge faith to each other.<sup>63</sup> This reading is confirmed not only by the disappearance of every reference to a 'Christian mystery',<sup>64</sup> but also by Caecilius' introductory remark

<sup>60</sup> Beaujeu, *Minucius Felix*, liv-lv provides a complete list of the parallels between Minucius Felix and Tertullian; see also, more recently, Nancy, 'Forme originale', 232-36.

<sup>61</sup> Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.5.

<sup>62</sup> Regarding the additions, we may note the complete transformation of the ritual, the preparation of the victim and its sacrifice. See on the issue Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 25-26 and *Die Phoinikika*, 35-36. Among the omissions, the most obvious are the promiscuous banquet and the incest, which are no longer conceived of as successive steps in the ritual and are, consequently, referred to somewhere else. For Minucius' transformation of his sources, see M.M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Philadelphia, 1975) 53.

<sup>63</sup> See Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 35 note 33, who compares the last words of Minucius' passage in *Oct.* 9.5; see also *ibid.* 26 and note 37 for Henrichs' comparison of the function of the killing of the victim in Minucius with the Greek oath sacrifice.

<sup>64</sup> Tertullian opens the passage *Apolog.* 7.1 with the term *sacramentum* or 'holy rite', but the references are numerous in the whole section: see 7.6, *mysteriis silentii*,

regarding the 'secret and nocturnal rites', and certainly by his previous statement that Christians 'establish a herd of a profane conspiracy, which is tied together by nightly meetings, and solemn fasts, and inhuman food'.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, Minucius deconstructs Tertullian's *mise en scène* and connects the accusation with the Bacchanalia scandal of 186 BC.

This reinterpretation obviously influences the form and the character of Octavius' reply in Chapter 30, which nevertheless presents many echoes of Tertullian's text.<sup>66</sup> In fact, Octavius does not begin his reply with the numerous instances of pagan child sacrifice as Tertullian did. Rather, he focuses firstly on different cases of infanticide, notably those of abortions practised by Roman women, and only then proceeds to refer to Saturn's devouring of his children. In this manner it provides an aetiological explanation for his next reference, viz. the child sacrifices performed 'in different parts of Africa' at Saturn's temples. It is in this context that he includes the numerous exempla of human sacrifices, also partially quoted by Tertullian, which form the core of his reply. The mention of Catilina, finally, allows him to change direction and to introduce cases of the consumption of human blood for medical purposes. The organisation of this response appears to be more logical and effective than Tertullian's. The examples follow an ascending line that reaches the core of Octavius' reply, namely human sacrifice by Romans, and then descends again in order to finish with a couple of certainly disgusting but not very horrible examples. This conscious reorganisation of the material is, in our opinion, the clearest proof of Minucius' dependence upon Tertullian. If this interpretation is correct, the testimonies of both, Tertullian and Minucius Felix, do not seem to imply any relevant change in the popular rumour about the Christians, which might still be as vague as those recorded by second century sources.

Origen documents the persistence of the accusations in the middle of the third century. In his book against Celsus, he argues that the charges of child sacrifice and incestuous unions were invented by

and the references to the mysteries of Samothrace and Eleusis; see also the beginning of Chapter 8.1, *vitam eternam*; 8.4, *talia initiatus et consignatus vivis in aevum*; and, finally, 8.7, *atque volentibus initiari and patrem illum sacrorum*. See also *Ad nat.* 1.15.2, *nos infanticidio litamus sive initiamus*.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.4.

<sup>66</sup> Compare Tertullian, *Apol.* 8.2 to Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 30.1.

the Jews and found good ground in the pagan mob ignorant of the word of God.<sup>67</sup> In his opinion, the accusation had its origin in popular rumours.

## 2

But if popular rumour is a possible explanation for the accusations against Christians, the same cannot be said about the charges of ritual infanticide and incest levelled by orthodox Christians against many different heretical groups. In contrast to the absolute absence of explicit pagan references to these indictments, polemic writings against heretics not only widely attest such charges but also provide meticulous and atrocious descriptions of the alleged rituals.

As early as the middle of the second century, Justin's *Apology* already documents the accusation against the Marcionites. After affirming that they wrongly called themselves 'Christians', he comments, 'Whether they do these shameful things described in rumours, the upsetting of the lamp and the licentious couplings and the meals of human flesh, we do not know'.<sup>68</sup> Justin does not pretend to have certain information,<sup>69</sup> but nevertheless, this is the first attempt to deflect the charges towards the heretics.

In line with Justin, Irenaeus also intends to turn the charges against the heretical Carpocratians, although he does not refer to specific vices and generally affirms that as Carpocratians 'practice every kind of impious act and godless deed', all Christians alike receive the blame for their conduct.<sup>70</sup> Clement of Alexandria refers to the Carpocratians as well, but even though his testimony is more explicit, he only refers to the promiscuity and incest.<sup>71</sup> However, it is Eusebius who not only reinforces these vague accusations but

<sup>67</sup> Origen, *C. Cels* 6.27.24-29 and 6.40. Origen's theory that Jews, who in their turn had also been accused of ritual murder by Apion (Josephus, *C. Apion.* II.92-6, cf. H. Jacobson, *Class. Quart.* 51, 2001, 318-9), were responsible for the origin of the slander was already pointed out by Justin (*Dial. c. Tryph.* 10.1; 17.1; 108.2) and would also be echoed in the third century by Commodianus (*Carmen Apologeticum* 847ff). Testimonies such as Clement's first letter (1Clem 5.2), Eusebius (*HE* 4.26.9) and Tertullian (*Apol.* 7.3) have further been adduced as support for the Jewish origin of the accusation, so Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 22-24 and notes 21-29.

<sup>68</sup> Justin, *Apol.* 1.26.7.

<sup>69</sup> Edwards, 'Christian Immoralities', 72 note 4.

<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.25.3-4.

<sup>71</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.2.10.1.



also gives them a specific form. Indeed, he asserts both that the Carpocratians committed all these crimes and that this is the reason why Christians were accused of having 'unlawful intercourse with mothers and sisters and eating unlawful meals'.<sup>72</sup>

From the fourth century onwards, the Montanists become the favourite goal of orthodox accusations. The first to record the allegation is Cyril of Jerusalem, although it has been suggested that the charge might have its origin in one of the apologetic works by Apollinaris of Hierapolis.<sup>73</sup> In a work written around 350, Cyril says that the Montanists 'slaughter the wretched little children of women and cut them up into unlawful meat for the sake of what among them are called mysteries'.<sup>74</sup> The story became widely diffused and appears, with slight differences, in the heresiological works of the fourth and fifth centuries. Epiphanius of Salamis records the charge, adds some macabre details and specifies that the real objective of the ritual was the blood of the victim. According to his testimony, the Montanists 'take a child, a mere infant, and pierce him throughout his body with bronze needles and so procure his blood for themselves, for the performance of a sacrifice'.<sup>75</sup> Philaster also records the story<sup>76</sup> and so does Augustine, who provides some additional details in his account as well.<sup>77</sup> The same charges appear in the letters of Isidore of Pelusium,<sup>78</sup> and we have to wait until Jerome's testimony to find the first scepticism regarding the accusation.<sup>79</sup>

However, the weirdest and most detailed exposition of the charges of ritual infanticide and incest against heretic groups appears in the *Panarion* by Epiphanius of Salamis. In his treatment of the customs of a Gnostic sect generally known as the Phibionites, Epiphanius reports that, after having sex with one another, if a woman becomes pregnant:

<sup>72</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 4.7.10-11; cf. 2.13.7 about the Simonians and 4.7.9 about the Nicolaites.

<sup>73</sup> J.B. Rives, 'The Blood Libel Against the Montanists', *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996) 117-24 at 120-22; see, in general, P. de Labriolle, *Les sources de l'histoire du Montanisme* (Paris, 1913) and R.E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Other Testimonia* (Macon, 1989).

<sup>74</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* 18.8.

<sup>75</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis, *Pan.* 48.14.5-6.

<sup>76</sup> Philaster, *Haer.* 49.

<sup>77</sup> Augustine, *Haer.* 26.7.

<sup>78</sup> Isidore of Pelusium, *Ep.* 1.242.

<sup>79</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 41.4.1; Theodoretus of Cyrhus, *Haer. fab. comp.* 3.2.

They extract the foetus at the stage appropriate for their enterprise, take this aborted infant, and cut it up into a trough shaped like a pestle. And they mix honey, pepper, and certain other perfumes and spices with it to keep from getting sick, and then all the revellers in this <herd> of swine and dogs assemble, and each eats a piece of the child with his fingers. And now, after this cannibalism, they pray to God and say, 'We were not mocked by the archon of lust, but have gathered the brother's blunder up!' And this, if you please, is their idea of the 'perfect Passover'.<sup>80</sup>

Even though some scholars consider that Epiphanius's report may reflect an actual ritual,<sup>81</sup> the horrific and exaggerated character of the story make this supposition rather unlikely.<sup>82</sup> It should be noted, furthermore, that the very same story, with a couple of disgusting additions, has turned up in the eighth century in the Great Book of Man-deans, but now told about Christians.<sup>83</sup>

Child sacrifice would also be attributed by Psellos to the Euchites and Gnostics, since he affirms that they kill children and threw them into the fire and then mixed their blood with their ashes and ate them. Before him, in the fifth century, Maruta of Maipherkat<sup>84</sup> accused the Borborians and, at the end of the eighth century, Theodor bar Konai did the same against the Manichaeans.<sup>85</sup> These testimonies are the last examples of the accusation in the context of inner conflicts within Christianity. From now on the accusation of child sacrifice would be directed towards the Jews. A clear sign of the new development appears in a recast of the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of Cannibals*, the so-called *Laudatio Andreae*, an anonymous composition probably written in the ninth or tenth century.<sup>86</sup> Whereas the original text speaks of the city of cannibals in general and simply calls

<sup>80</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis, *Pan.* 25.5.5-6.

<sup>81</sup> Notably Speyer, 'Zu den Vorwürfen', 129-31; Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual', 28-29, although he points out that the alleged Gnostic rituals alone cannot account for the accusations; however, in his *Die Phoinikika*, 36 his opinion is less nuanced; Benko, 'Pagan Criticism', 1085-87.

<sup>82</sup> K. Rudolph, *Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, tr. R. MacLachlan Wilson (San Francisco, 1987) 249ff. See also Edwards, 'Christian Immoralities', 72.

<sup>83</sup> Great Book, 228, 14-27.

<sup>84</sup> O. Braun, *De sancta Nicaena synodo: Syrische Texte des Maruta von Maipherkat übersetzt* (Münster, 1898) 48.

<sup>85</sup> A. Adam, *Texte zum Maichäismus* (Berlin, 1954) 77.

<sup>86</sup> See M. Bonnet, 'Acta Andreae apostoli cum laudatione contexta', *Analecta Bollandiana* 13 (1894) 309-52.

its inhabitants anthropophagoi, 'man-eaters',<sup>87</sup> the *Laudatio* describes them not only as cannibals but also as Jews.<sup>88</sup> Thus, the accusations against the Jews experience exactly the same evolution as those issued against Christians and heretics. What in the beginning was anthropophagy gradually became the well-known myth of the ritual murder of children. This myth would be responsible for the persecutions of Jews in the Middle Ages and the numerous processes against them from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries on the charge of child murder.

## 3

Studies of the charges of child sacrifice against the early Christians tend to give credit to these reports by orthodox writers and suggest that actual ritual Gnostic practices might have provided grounds for the appearance of the accusation. In the 1930s, and after an exhaustive analysis of the evidence, Dölger proposed five possible origins for the accusations, among which the 'Gnostic theory' made its first appearance:<sup>89</sup>

1. The alleged ritual murder performed by the Jews was later on extended to Christians.
2. The Greek and old-Italic oath sacrifice with a human victim as the ritual foundation of a *coniuratio*.
3. Ritual infanticide for magical purposes.
4. Actual initiation rituals performed by Gnostics.
5. Misunderstanding of the Eucharist.

Until the end of the twentieth century, studies on the issue curiously remained within the framework established by Dölger and either presented a combination of these factors or else chose one of them to state their point. Thus, for example, Wolfgang Speyer in 1963, even though admitting that it was not the only reason, argued that the use of Syrian and Egyptian Gnostics was a determinant in the genesis of the accusation.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* II/1 (Leipzig, 1898) 65-127.

<sup>88</sup> Bonnet, 'Acta Andreae cum laudatione contexta', 317.13-319.2 at 318.14ff.

<sup>89</sup> Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 227f.

<sup>90</sup> Speyer, 'Zu den Vorwürfen', 130.

In 1967, Rudolph Freudenberger, in turn, argued that the first and the second possibilities proposed by Dölger were already combined before the charge was pressed against Christians. He traced the motif back to 2, namely to the *coniuratio*, as he considered that the third and fifth explanations may simply be attributed to Fronto and that the fourth alternative is impossible because the accusation existed long before the appearance of Gnostics.<sup>91</sup>

In his studies from 1970 and 1972, Albert Henrichs presents a synthesis of both previous approaches.<sup>92</sup> After combining 1 and 2 in the same way as Freudenberger, he suggests that although the Jews were responsible for the extension of the charge to Christians, its contents proceed from similar ritualistic practices of pagan origin. Ritual practices actually committed by Gnostics, however, might have provided grounds for the accusation against the whole Church.

In 1980 Stephen Benko adopted approximately the same approach. He combined 1 and 5 and thus concluded that Jews were responsible for the first accusation against Christians. Fronto's misinterpretation of the Eucharist further supported the defamation. In his view, however, the suspicion that Christians in general were guilty of *flagitia* could only arise from the actual committing of the crime by Gnostics.<sup>93</sup>

Excluding Freudenberger, consequently, all these scholars take actual Gnostic practices as the origin of the slanders. This explanation is certainly striking since it seems to obviate the fact that later on the same or very similar accusations would be extended against the Jews. In the case of the medieval blood libel against the Jews, which practices, and performed by whom, were the origin of the slanders? But the most remarkable thing about this explanation is that while no single scholar gives credit to the charges when they are pressed against mainstream Christians, most investigators do tend to believe them when told about heretics.<sup>94</sup> However, this is perhaps not as strange as it may seem, since in a last analysis these splinter

<sup>91</sup> Freudenberger, 'Der Vorwurf', 106-07.

<sup>92</sup> Henrichs, 'Pagan Ritual' and *Die Phoinikika*, respectively.

<sup>93</sup> Benko, 'Pagan Criticism', 1084-85 and 1087.

<sup>94</sup> Already C. Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Brucianus* (Leipzig, 1892) 573ff. gave credit to Epiphanius' account on the grounds of his direct knowledge of the Egyptian sects. Despite the reservations of Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 220-21, Speyer, *passim*, and Benko, 'Pagan Criticism', 1085-87 accept Epiphanius' report as trustworthy.



groups are still today frequently seen as representatives of a deviant way of thought concerning the orthodox standard values.<sup>95</sup> Even though the reliability of the accounts of the fathers of the Church has recently been seriously questioned,<sup>96</sup> their black and white testimony concerning Gnostics is still seen by many as normative.

Consequently a new approach is necessary, and in 1992 M.J. Edwards, following a suggestion by Marcel Detienne,<sup>97</sup> compared early Christian ethics with the rejection of social and religious standard values by the Cynics.<sup>98</sup> After refuting one by one the five possibilities suggested by Dölger, Edwards surmised that the accusations were maliciously inferred from the Christian disdain of social customs, which was expressed in two very public shows of abstinence – from the altar and from the bed.

J.B. Rives developed this line of investigation in a comprehensive and excellent paper about human sacrifice among pagans and Christians.<sup>99</sup> He claimed an understanding of 'the stories told about Christians not as distorted accounts of an actual practice, but as accurate if metaphorical accounts of the Christians' place in Greco-Roman society'. According to Rives, then, instead of relating the charges against Christians with this or that practice, they should be placed in the wider context of Greco-Roman discourse about civilisation and religion.

These two scholars, however, mainly explained how or why the accusation was levelled against the early Christians and left aside the origin of the charges by orthodox Christians both against heretics and Jews. Edwards comments in passing that the extension of the charges of cannibalism against the heretics may have arisen from an orthodox attempt to deflect the charges originally levelled against them onto different splinter groups.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Rives considers that this might be the origin of the charges against the Montanists.<sup>101</sup> Our

<sup>95</sup> The so-called inner Gnostic polemics in *Pistis Sophia* 147 and the *Second Book of Jeu* 43 (Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften*, 196), sometimes adduced as a proof for the existence of these rites, only attest, if at all, sexual practices of libertine sects, but certainly not the charge of child sacrifice.

<sup>96</sup> M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: an argument for dismantling a dubious category* (Princeton, 1996); K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge Mass., 2003).

<sup>97</sup> M. Detienne, *Dionysos mis à mort* (Paris, 1977) 108ff.

<sup>98</sup> Edwards, 'Christian Immoralities'.

<sup>99</sup> Rives, 'Human Sacrifice', 65-67 and 83ff.

<sup>100</sup> Edwards, 'Christian Immoralities'.

<sup>101</sup> Rives, 'The Blood Libel', 120.

evidence, however, seems to indicate the contrary. On the one hand, we have seen that explicit references to the charges from the pagan side are rather scarce, if not wholly nonexistent, and that these are mainly attested by Christian sources. On the other, we have also seen that orthodox accusations against heretics and the alleged pagan charges against Christians appear exactly at the same time, namely in the second century. Is it not possible to think, then, that it was the other way around? If mainstream Christians fallaciously accused other Christian groups whom they considered heretical of committing all kind of crimes, these accusations may easily have reached pagan ears. Given that pagans would not necessarily distinguish between Christian sects, if there were in fact rumours about secret child sacrifices performed by Christians it is very plausible that they were simply repeating what Christians were saying about other Christians.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, on the basis of our evidence the question arises whether we are not just dealing with an exclusively Christian motif.

In the first pages of his *Homo necans*, W. Burkert asserted that 'blood and violence lurk fascinatingly at the very heart of religion'.<sup>103</sup> Two thousand years earlier, Lucretius, the great Roman poet, seems to have held the same opinion. Indeed, after praising his master Epicurus for freeing humanity from the fear of the gods, Lucretius begins an indictment against the crimes of religion (*scelerosa atque impia facta*), the core of which is the narration of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphianassa, a lesser known variant of Iphigenia.<sup>104</sup>

But Burkert also suggestively asserted that the death of God's innocent son for the redemption of humanity shows that murder is also at the core of Christianity. Two recent studies on human sacrifice in two remote contexts come to similar conclusions. We are referring to P. Tierney's *The Highest Altar* and to R.P. Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*. In commenting on

<sup>102</sup> So already Dölger, 'Sacramentum infanticidii', 217 and 223, although with reservations.

<sup>103</sup> W. Burkert, *Homo Necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin/New York, 1972) 8.

<sup>104</sup> See now J.N. Bremmer, 'Sacrificing a Child in Ancient Greece: the case of Iphigeneia', in E. Noort and E.J.C. Tigchelaar (eds), *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Leiden, 2001) 21-43; G. Ekroth, 'Inventing Iphigeneia? On Euripides and the Cultic Construction of Brauron', *Kernos* 16 (2003) 59-118.

a recent case of ritual murder committed by individuals belonging to the 'Evangelical Army of Chile', the first author states that 'The core of human-sacrifice ideology is that a surrogate victim in one way or another saves others by his or her death. Christians believe they are saved by the blood of the sacrificed Jesus. If God the Father sacrificed His own Son (...), to save humanity from the power of Satan', he argues, 'a simple person (...) might not see any difference in driving a stake through her own son to save her father and vanquish the demonic powers threatening the community...'.<sup>105</sup> According to Hsia, the medieval blood libel against the Jews had a similar background. 'The essential underlying ritual-murder-discourse was the Christian belief in sacrifice, the dominant form of its representation being the story of Christ's Passion. In accusing the Jews of child murders, and in extracting confessions from the suspects, the magistrates and the people thus created repetitions and variations on the theme of Christian sacrifice. The tortured Christian children, the bleeding little martyrs, and the abused Eucharist became symbols by which a society created its own moments and loci of sanctity'.<sup>106</sup> It should be noted that most accusations against the Gnostics worked on the same elements and seem to present exactly the same background.

In our view, the persistence and recurrence of the accusations of child sacrifice against or by the Christians not only shows that the motif may very well be a typically Christian one, but also offers indirect evidence for the relevance of an obscure myth that – whether well founded or unfounded – has accompanied Christianity throughout its 2000 years of history.

<sup>105</sup> P. Tierney, *The Highest Altar. The History of Human Sacrifice* (New York, 1989) 368-69.

<sup>106</sup> R.P. Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven and London, 1988) 226f.

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